

Pastor and People.

Sermon by Rev. Alexander Topp, D.D. at the opening of the General Assembly.

"For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, thou shalt share in another place, but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed; and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"—Esther iv 14

Whatever may be the outward condition of the Church of God at any time, however apparently depressed and cast down, to whatever perils or trials it may be exposed, we have the assurance that its cause is that which is destined to make progress and finally to be triumphant. It has been ever opposed and resisted and persecuted; still it has at the same time, in the face of all that is contrary or actively hostile, held on its way, bringing enemies into willing, cheerful subjection, and showing itself to be the only power which can subdue the carnal passions of the heart of man, and produce in him conformity to the holy law of God. It was long since the inspired psalmist could in faith thus exult over the adversaries of the truth: "Why do the heathen rage, and the people?" etc.

The same sentiment is found in almost every page of the sacred volume. It was emphatically, though figuratively, set forth in the first promise after the fall, when the tempter is thus addressed by God himself: "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed. He shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise his heel." Here was the foreshadowing of complete victory. The truth of it has been gradually but surely developing itself. And all the record of the past has been but one accumulating mass of evidence, forming a firm foundation on which to rest, that the empire of sin and Satan will be cast down, and the blessed reign of the Messiah shall everywhere prevail.

The certainty of the care which God exercises over the advancement of His own work, as well as of the accomplishment of His purpose, is clearly stated in the words which we have read; at least we have an example of it in this passage. The reference is to the cause of God, or rather to the people who were identified with the cause of God, viz. the Jews, many of whom were scattered throughout the kingdom of Persia. A plot had been arranged, at the instigation of the prime minister, to destroy all the Jews in the land. Everything, humanly speaking, seemed to favor the accomplishment of the plot. But the statement is made, evidently on divine authority, that it shall not be successful, but that enlargement and deliverance shall arise to the Jews. God is at no loss how to fulfil His designs. He has everything at His disposal, and can work by whatever means He pleaseth, or without means. We have the express determination of His word "that no weapon formed against His people shall prosper," and the declaration of our Lord Himself in the New Testament: "I build my Church upon a rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

Nevertheless, that assurance does not relieve those who are identified with the cause of God of their responsibility in connection with the same. "Ye are my witnesses," saith the Lord to all His people. They are His representatives among their fellowmen, and to whom is He to look for the maintenance of His own cause, and for the defence of His truth against all opposing powers, but to those who are the professing members of His Church. All Israel were bound to uphold and contend, at the sacrifice of their life, if need be, for the good of the commonwealth, and hence, though the work had been accomplished and the victory over the enemies of the land had been gained without their aid, yet the solemn and decided injunction was issued: "Curse ye, Moroz," said the angel of the Lord, "curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof, because they come not to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty."

So here Esther, the Queen, has, in the providence of God, been placed in circumstances in which she could help her people and save them from the bloodthirsty designs of Haman. She is reminded of her obligation and warned that if she did not seize the opportunity of using the influence to which she had access for that end, she and her father's house would be destroyed; yet enlargement and deliverance would come from another quarter. The safety of the Jews was not absolutely in her power. The intimation was given that it would somehow be brought about in the arrangements of God's providence, yet because of the place which she occupied she stands forth as the responsible person, and on her the obligation rested to employ the means put by God into her hands with that view. "Who knoweth but thou art come to the kingdom?"—to hold the high position which thou dost fill for this very end; yet God's people may be saved from destruction, and his cause and name honored in the sight of the nations.

Such appears to be the purport of the passage before us. And its application to the circumstances of the people of God individually, according to their means and opportunities of usefulness, or to the Church of Christ generally, or to any one professing Church specially, requires no straining at all. It is quite plain and obvious. It is just the carrying out of the principle so clearly laid down by our Lord himself: "To whomsoever much is given, of him much will be required." And that is a principle which commends itself alike to reason and conscience and sound judgment.

We intend to use it on this occasion with reference to our position and circumstances as a Church, and our great responsibility thence arising. I observe that the furtherance of the cause of God ought to be the grand concern of the professing Church of Christ in all the forms in which it exists. Every one who professes to have received Christ is under obligation to regard himself as the Lord's, and called upon to live for the honor of Christ supremely. So ought it to be with professing believers collectively. Indeed, the very design for which Christian societies or Churches were formed at

first, and have ever since been organized, is that the members thereof may not only exemplify to the world the spectacle of oneness in the faith of Christ, and be mutually helpful to one another for their growth in grace, and building up in holiness, but that they may combine their means, and resources, and power all the more effectually, to bring that truth to bear upon others around, and to spread it over all the earth.

Of course, when we thus speak of the Church we do not mean the real, invisible Church, composed of all the members of Christ's mystical body, but the organization which bears the name of Christ, which professes to lift up a testimony for, and is identified with Him. In consequence of the imperfection of even sanctified human nature, the Church of Christ is not one visibly in the face of the world. It is split up into communities, differing in some particular points of doctrine, or worship or government, yet holding generally the same cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith, recognizing each other too as Churches of Christ, yet not acting as one body in the pursuit of the same common end.

This division is not the work of God, but the work of Man. Some may say that it is necessary for the interests of the truth, and unavoidable because of the rarity which exists in the constitution of men's minds, preventing agreement in all things, and thus causing the ground of separation. But whilst there may be arguments of this nature used, they appear to be of a selfish, worldly kind, and to take it for granted the men must necessarily so differ in regard to articles of faith, and principles of government as that they cannot become an incorporated body, united in Christ, but must be content with co-operation only. People speak of the tribes of Israel being separate bodies, all forming separate communities, yet combined in one commonwealth for the promotion of the common end, for mutual defence and protection against the enemies of Israel. But is there any argument of necessity there? Is it not rather, at the best, only an illustration of how the professing Churches of Christ, holding the same truths, ought to act in the circumstances of separation in which they now are, and not any ground laid down in the word of God as establishing the propriety and necessity of the present condition of things in the visible Church of Christ? Does it not seem to imply that God does not design to bring about unity—a visible unity in the Church—and that he cannot so move the human sentiments and affections as to produce it, though confessedly He alone can touch and quicken the dead soul, and bring about a willing subjection to Christ? He who can lead the soul to Christ, can certainly bring about such unity of sentiment and action as to make His Church visibly one. And that this is His design appears to be evident from much of the language of Scripture, especially from the words of our Lord himself on several occasions, plainly indicating such a consummation. In His last intercessory prayer we find Him using these words, "That they all may be one, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." Now true believers have always been thus one with Christ, and with the Father in Christ, necessarily so, as the subjects of His kingdom, and consequently it follows that our Lord prays for a further unity, and that a unity which will be instrumental in persuading the world to believe that Jesus Christ is the sent of God. And again he says in another place, "And other sheep I have which are not of this fold. Them also I must bring, and there shall be one fold, and one Shepherd."

But situated as the Churches of Christ are, their distinguishing mark should be that of devotedness to the work of their great head, and of anxiety to promote in every way, both within and without, and throughout the whole earth, the influence of His truth, and the salvation of men thereby. The more tenaciously any Church adheres to this in the spirit of its master, so much the more does it answer its grand design. Whenever a Church is taken up with matters either political or secular, or is satisfied with the general influence which it exerts in the community or country, apart from the honoring of Christ in the gathering of sinners to Him, and in the growing sanctification of His people; whenever it fails to make the progress of true religion, and all that tends thereto the great object of its care and earnest consideration, and persevering, self-denying efforts, in so far as it failing to cherish and exhibit the mind of Him who was consumed with the zeal of His Father's house. If in mere outward arrangements, which are so far necessary, the Church finds its attention principally occupied; if the internal things of spiritual conviction, and holy living, and the repression of social evils, and the advancement of whatever is favourable to the cause of godliness are not the prominent and absorbing subjects of the Church's prayers, and deliberations and active labours, then is it losing sight of its special business, and placing a barrier between itself, and the fulfilment of the gracious promise of the divine favour. The history of the past clearly proves that Churches as outward organizations may come to nought, whilst the cause of Christ goes on advancing. To secure the then presence of the Holy Spirit, as the spirit of light and life and moral beauty, ought to be the aim of every true branch of the visible Church of Christ. And when it is faithful to its Lord, in the steadfast maintenance of His truth, in the ardent prosecution of His work, in the cultivation of brotherly love, and in the stimulating of its members to works of faith and labors of love and self-sacrifice for the good of souls, then may we rest in the assurance that God will be merciful to it, and bless it, so that the Redeemer may through its instrumentality see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied. It holds good with churches as with individuals. "Them that honor me I will honor, but they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed."

II. There are times when particular churches, whether from situation or emergent circumstances, or the character of the age, are peculiarly called upon to lift

up a banner bearing the truth, and to prosecute their work with all the greater eagerness and fidelity and vigor. Every church that is a mark of wisdom to know and take advantage of favorable circumstances which may occur for the furtherance of his own interests either temporal or eternal, or those of the nation and the world.

The discernment of business is quite familiar with the sailor spreads his sails when the wind is favorable to help on his vessel, and wisely in so doing, because he cannot catch the wind. He must take it when it comes. In like manner in the Christian life, where the tide runs so rapidly, and largely filling the almost empty vessel, the mariner prepares his vessel for the favorable opportunity of the wind's destination without difficulty, and with national benefit, it was high time he did choose for abolishing it. When God in His providence has called in the nation to this as the only way for the good of the land, God has given the power and he used it for that purpose.

Then when we read in scripture the children of Israel spoken of as "men of understanding, and great knowledge of the times to know what Israel ought to do." When Samuel anointed Saul for the kingly office, he said certain things which would have led him as he went on his way, and the prophet, "let it be that which the Lord has come unto thee thou shalt do, for the Lord's voice shall be heard in vision." So also when David was with the Philistines, he ended with them into my hand? The Lord said, "Go not up against the Philistines, for they are not thine, and I shall be against the Philistines. David said, "The Lord commanded him, and he smote the Philistines from Gibeon to Gaza."

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the unjust steward because he was not wise; not his injustice but his wisdom, as a pattern for our use, in the prospect of eternity. He does not earnestly pray for our deliverance, to realize the danger of being with serious impressions upon the spirit upon the heart, which should never return. "Quench not the spirit." Remember how our Lord said of the once favored city: "O, Jerusalem! Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, but thou wouldest not; thou knewest not the day of thy visitation." When the spirit had been poured out on the day of Pentecost, and the Apostles spake with other tongues, they seized the opportunity to proclaim Christ and His Gospel; and the same day there were added to the Church 3000 souls. When the vision appeared to Paul at Troas—the vision of a man of Macedonia, saying, "Come over into Macedonia and help us"—he wisely discerned the path of duty, and proceeded thither, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called him to preach the Gospel unto them. And so when the spirit of God is moving the hearts of men, when religious anxiety prevails in any place, then is a time for the servants and people of God to enter in by the open door, and to seek to gather in a rich harvest of souls for the Lord. The Holy Ghost is a free spirit. He worketh where, and when, and how He pleaseth. He comes in answer to prayer. Let the Church abound therein; and when He comes, let the Church bestir herself.

Then, again, there are generally at particular periods fundamental doctrines, which as being subjects of assault demand special recognition and advocacy, or, as our forefathers used to say, there is a present truth to be maintained. And perhaps, if I may be allowed to say it, it appears to me that there are two essential doctrines which require to have prominence in the church at the present day as being peculiarly assailed, either directly or indirectly; and these are the inspiration of the Scriptures, their divine authority, and the priestly office of Jesus Christ, His atoning sacrifice, His vicarious work of obedience and sufferings and death for the sins of His people. If you touch the former you shake the very foundations of our faith; and if you depreciate or attempt to explain away the latter you endeavor to render vain and futile the incarnation of the Son of God; you try to make His mission into this world a meaningless undertaking on the part of the Godhead. "If these foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?" Just as the consideration was placed before Esther, whether she had not come to the kingdom for the purpose referred to, the deliverance of the Jews, so have churches to consider, and that seriously, whether there may not be certain things in their history and circumstances, calling upon them to shake themselves from the dust, to awake, and put on strength; to put on their beautiful garments; to hold not their peace, and give the Lord no rest, until He arise and make Jerusalem a praise in the earth. Let us implore wisdom to discern the signs of the times, and act accordingly for Christ and His truth.

III. And this leads us to notice in the third place, that such a time as this appears to have come to us when God in His providence is specially bidding us realize our position and our circumstances, and the claims of His cause upon us, for the purpose of summoning us to higher aims, and more abundant self-denying efforts on the part of both ministers and people for the building up of His cause in this land and elsewhere.

I. God has been pleased to give very great increase and extension in this Dominion to that particular branch of the Protestant church with which we are connected. We who now in these days carry on our pastoral work generally with so many external conveniences and aids and comforts, as in the country from which our Presbyterianism has emanated, have no

experimental knowledge, and but little conception of the far different circumstances in which our predecessors who came to this continent had to exercise their ministry. The pioneers of our church, who ought never to be mentioned but with honor, after undergoing hardships unknown now, and many trials, have all passed away to their rest and reward above. But the seed which they were privileged to sow, has, by the blessing of God, taken deep root and grown up into a noble stately tree, whose wide spreading branches are covering the whole land, affording shelter and spiritual refreshment, and dropping down precious fruit to multitudes of our fellow-countrymen. We may well say not with boastfulness, but with humble gratitude and fervent praise, that the promise has been here fulfilled. "A little one has become a thousand, and a strong one a great nation; I the Lord will hasten it in His time."

Far be it from us to speak, as if there were no recognition of the labors of other churches. On the contrary we all, I feel assured, rejoice heartily with them, as they recount with thankfulness the Lord's goodness to them in the past, and in so far as they have been enabled to prosecute the Lord's work with growing success. May the Lord give them abundant prosperity. It is our sincere earnest petition. "Peace be with all them that love our Lord in sincerity!" But of course we are now dealing with what concerns ourselves, and the claims which the Lord consequently has upon our more thorough devoted services to Him. For surely the grand and only really satisfactory acknowledgment which the Presbyterianism of this country can give of the growth and prosperity which God hath vouchsafed in the days that are past, is to labor and pray that through the instrumentality of those who now belong to the church, whether as office-bearers or members, there may be by the divine blessing the same advancing tide of progress and usefulness, a breaking forth on the right hand and on the left, that salvation may be nigh to them that fear Him, and that glory may dwell in our land.

2. The unity of the various branches of our common Presbyterianism, which by the blessing of God has been effected, has laid upon the united church a weightier responsibility, and a louder call to greater faithfulness and ardour in the work entrusted to it. As different churches, and acting separately, and often as it were, crossing each other's path, there was not only a tendency to isolation from each other, though holding professedly the same doctrine and government, and worship and discipline, but the influence which they exerted was a scattered influence, not like that of a solid, powerful phalanx, as when they appear before the country as one, not in co-operation only but in a corporate capacity. As one compact body, perhaps the largest Protestant church in the Dominion, its weight cannot but be felt with regard to all that affects the highest interests of the country. I do not mean that the church should ever identify itself with any political party, and thus become an engine for the carrying out of the views and aims that are connected therewith. So soon as it becomes such, its power as an institution of Christ, whose kingdom is not of this world, will begin to wane, and its spiritual life will be sadly injured. Such a church as this to which we belong, though like its Divine Master it does not strive or cry or lift up its voice in the streets, cannot fail, wherever its sentiments are known, to have a mighty influence on public opinion. And all the more so, when it is found addressing itself exclusively and energetically to its proper work, seeking the moral and spiritual welfare of the community.

But I do not speak so much of the natural influence which one church may exert and will exert upon the institutions and interests of the country. I refer to the unity of action, and the combination of resources, and the greater concentration of aim and effort which the United Church, extended over the whole Dominion, may be expected to bring and ought to bring to bear upon the great work of the Church,—the extension of its own borders, the prosecution of home and foreign missionary operations, and the preparation of a qualified and devoted ministry. It is matter of thankfulness to God that the work of missions both at home and abroad has been carried on with so much vigor and success. "God be merciful to us and bless us for that end." "That Thy way may be known upon the earth, and Thy saving health upon all nations." Grace comes into the heart, yet it may go forth to embrace others. And so the spirit of Christ dwells in the Church that its sympathies may extend to and its efforts be directed towards the subjection of all to the government of Messiah. And in a special manner let the Colleges and Theological Halls of our Church have our warmest affections, and our most anxious care, and the most liberal support. "The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; pray ye the Lord of the harvest that He would send forth laborers into His harvest." These are objects of concern which demand the constant sollecitude of the Church, and according as they occupy the forefront or not in all its proceedings, so will it have the favor and countenance of its Great Head or not. It stands true at all times. "The Lord is with you while ye be with Him; and if ye seek Him He will be found of you; but if ye forsake Him He will forsake you."

3. Another element in the responsibility which rests upon us as a church, is the fact that the country in which we find ourselves is one which is only, as it were, in its youth, apparently destined to become the abode of a numerous people, and of a great and mighty nation in the course of time. The future of any man's character and position, and acting, depends very much, under God, upon his early training, and the influences by which he is surrounded. So the future of this Dominion, in so far as its social, and intellectual and moral condition is concerned, will, subject to the Divine hand, be fashioned to a large extent by the faithfulness with which the truth is presented and pressed upon the hearts and consciences of those who have to bear their parts in moulding and building up the institutions of the country.

It was well said by the Queen of the realm that the Word of God is the source

of Britain's greatness. And as God has been pleased to give our Church a high vantage ground in this portion of the British Empire—a vast territory, so rapidly growing into importance and numbers—as he hath called our Church to occupy a position of such prominence in it, surely it becomes the Church to realize its obligations, to gird itself for the discharge of them to the utmost of its diligence and power, to strive unweariedly for the lengthening of its cords and the strengthening of its stakes, and for the leavening of the great mass of the population with scriptural principles and scriptural views, that the righteousness which alone exalteth a nation may prevail in it. We bless God for the heritage which has come down to us as the precious, distinguishing feature of Presbyterianism—I mean the profession of those scriptural doctrines of grace which God hath especially owned, and blessed in every age, and which we trust will be handed down unimpaired as the doctrines which alone are according to godliness. Let us proclaim them as the great apostle did, determined to know nothing save Jesus Christ and him crucified.

The mission of our Church, indeed, is one eminently fitted to inspire all its office-bearers and members with a holy courage, and determination and zeal to go forth, in dependence on the divine blessing, to seek enlargement for the cause for the Gospel and deliverance for the slaves of sin and Satan into the glorious liberty of the sons of God. And the more steadfastly and calmly the Church sets itself to this, and the faithful preaching of the truth as it is in Christ, and the use of all appointed means, and the entering in by open doors, whether to individual sinners, or to destitute localities, with the healing balm of the great Physician, opposing all social evils, and countenancing all that is for the promotion of vital godliness, laboring to extend itself more fully from ocean to ocean, and to send the glad tidings of salvation to heathen lands so much the more will it be honored to build up the spiritual temple of God, and to contribute to the hastening on of the time when Jews and Gentiles, all shall be brought in, when there shall be one Lord, and His name one over all the earth. Let us be the spirit and language of Nehemiah: "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down." "The God of heaven, He will prosper us; we His servants will arise and build."

Fathers and Brethren, we have sought thus to keep before us, in looking forward to the work of another assembly, the great responsibility devolving upon us as a Church in the position which we occupy. But what is applicable to the Church as a whole, is applicable to every minister, and elder, and deacon and member individually. The spirit and character of the aggregate depends on the spirit and character of each of the individuals composing it. Hence the necessity of the Holy Spirit in our hearts as the spirit of life, and faith, and holiness, and love, and power, in our respective spheres of labour. Then may we expect that God, even our God, will bless us abundantly.

Let us cultivate the spirit of unity and love and peace. "Behold, how good and how pleasant a thing it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! There God commands the blessing, even life for ever more." Of course unity and peace are only to be sought and found in consistency with the word of God. Peace with God rests upon the honoring of His law, and the satisfying of His justice in the person and work of Christ, and so peace in the Church must rest on the honoring of His own truth. "Buy the truth and sell it not."

But in all matters of mere policy, and the best mode of procedure to accomplish the work of the Church, let there be nothing of the spirit of contention for the mastery but the manifestation of a single eye for the glory of God and the good of Jerusalem, and God will make plain the path of duty. "Upon the upright there ariseth light in the darkness."

And, knowing that except the Lord build the house they labor in vain that build it, let all our work as a Church, and in our several congregations, be ever accompanied by earnest, believing prayer for the descent of the Spirit to make the truth effectual and saving. He alone can give efficacy to the means. "Prove me now herewith, and see if I will not open the windows of Heaven and pour out a blessing that there shall not be room to receive it."

The Art of Preaching.

It is preaching of Christ our Lord which is the secret and substance and centre and heart of all preaching; not merely of facts about Him and notions about Him, but of His person, His work, His simple yet unfathomable sayings—here lies the secret, the art of preaching. Independently of its great and sacred aim, and of the matter to be taught, preaching is an art; in the careful consideration of that art lie many secondary but not unimportant means for the more complete and perfect attainment of the end. With these we are all familiar. We know that the word—not in its theoretical sense, but as the briefest mode of expressing the art of business and conversation—the word in man is a great instrument of power. As long as 8,000 years ago, among these ancient forefathers of the Greek nation, from whom we have still in many things much to learn, and in whom we find a multitude of points of sympathy, it is most remarkable that the great orator, the great poet, who has commemorated their deeds, and who lived in a time of turbulence and war, nevertheless places one other instrument of power upon a level with the sword, and that is the word proceeding from the mouth of man. Well, now, this word has to be consecrated to aims most high and solemn, which were in great part hidden from the men of those days; but the more high and solemn the aim the greater ought to be the care that the means for attaining such an end are carefully considered and wisely employed.—W. H. Gladstone.

We do not believe immortality because we have proved it, but we forever try to prove it because we believe it.—Martin Luther.

Thou grace that leads to Christ, first comes from Christ. If I live on him, I feel that I am enabled to live to Him.—Rowland Hill.